

PLOTTING THE FUTURE *in Changing Times*



By Greg Freeman

The challenge in 2003 was to meet a goal set by Governor John Hoeven of 1 million acres of private land for public access by the end of the decade. The milestone was met last year when the North Dakota Game and Fish Department enrolled nearly 1.1 million acres in its Private Land Open To Sportsmen program.

Turns out, the real test might just be starting, according to Kevin Kading, Department private land section leader.

"We need to maintain those PLOTS acres, especially those tied to the Conservation Reserve Program and native grasslands," Kading said. "The benefits of CRP are costly to replace once it is gone, and native grasslands can never be truly replaced. The Department is taking a good hard look at the PLOTS program to see where we will be able to have the most positive impact on landowners, hunters and wildlife."

The benefits of the CRP program over the last 20 years are many, Kading said, yet the public in general has been somewhat complacent thinking CRP and native grasslands will always be part of the North Dakota landscape. "But that's all changing, and it's changing fast," he said.

The PLOTS program is sure to suffer, Kading said, as many acres of PLOTS that contain CRP and native grasslands are being converted to cropland for row crops or small grains.

The Game and Fish Department has long maintained that land enrolled in PLOTS is a supplement, not a cure all, for hunters knocking on doors to seek permission to hunt private land. But, with the loss of more than 400,000 CRP acres in 2007, loss of 144,000 acres of native grasslands between 2002-07, and the impending loss of another 1.9 million acres in the next five years, concerns over habitat quality and finding places to hunt will escalate.

Unfortunately, a PLOTS tract you hunted last fall may not be there when you return this autumn.



CRAIG BIRLE

Pheasants likely receive the greatest amount of hunting pressure from hunters on North Dakota's PLOTS lands. These lands also harbor deer and other wildlife.

"Hunters may be surprised when they arrive at their favorite PLOTS tract this fall only to find that all or portions of the PLOTS have been broken up to be farmed," Kading said.

In some cases, the Department may be able to work with landowners to keep some land in PLOTS even after it's converted from grass to cropland. Yet, in other cases, there may be very little, if any, habitat remaining. The end result is that tract of land will be removed from the PLOTS program.

With the imminent loss of CRP and other native grasslands, and the lack of substance regarding conservation practices in the new farm bill, the Game and Fish Department will have to be creative and develop programs and incentives to offset habitat losses.

Department officials are concerned that eventually the loss of millions of acres of quality habitat will negatively influence wildlife populations,

which will result in fewer hunters in the field. "And those hunter dollars are responsible for a large part of the budget which ultimately funds the PLOTS program," Kading said. "As habitat losses continue to mount, funding levels might possibly decrease. Currently, there is an adequate budget for PLOTS, but it will be very difficult for conservation to compete with high cash rents and commodity prices in the future."

Doug Howie, Department assistant private land coordinator, said the loss of CRP is justified by producers because CRP rental rates today do not compete with cash rents, high commodity prices and the demand for more cropland.

"The PLOTS program will have to weather the storm by working with private landowners to maintain habitat in priority areas of the state, and to work with sensitive areas (such as wetlands and associated uplands) or species until all this settles down," Howie said.

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The recently passed farm bill leans more toward working lands programs, and Howie said there may be opportunities for the Department to piggyback with the U.S. Department of Agriculture to create habitat or enhance conservation on active farmlands.

Habitat losses will change the state's wildlife populations and the PLOTS program, but there are some bright spots that may help private landowners, wildlife and hunters through these changing times:

- The USDA offers CRP practices to landowners on a continuous basis, meaning they can sign up for the program at any time. Kading said there appears to be a shift from large, general CRP signups to more targeted signups that are directed at high priority habitats and sensitive species such as prairie chickens, sage grouse, water birds and other threatened and endangered species. These practices provide quality habitat and benefit many species; the Department can provide additional incentives to landowners if they choose to enroll these lands into PLOTS.
- USDA is reviewing CRP rental rates. An adjustment in rental rates may help maintain or increase interest in the program and be more in line with what landowners could receive for cash rent.
- The Department relies on partnerships with other state and federal agencies as well as conservation groups. A key partner is USDA. The Department is currently working with USDA's Farm Service Agency on a Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program agreement, which allows producers with expiring CRP to voluntarily reenroll that land into CRP with additional incentives from the Department's PLOTS program.
- Legislation was passed in the recent farm bill that adds authority for states and tribal governments to apply for grants to encourage private landowners to voluntarily make land available for access by the public for wildlife-dependent recreation, including hunting and fishing. The Department may apply for a grant to supplement the PLOTS budget.

"The PLOTS program will still provide hunters with quality acres short-term, but we are concerned with how the landscape will look in the future," Kading said. "We need to find a way to supplement the impending loss of CRP ... we have to."

GREG FREEMAN is the Game and Fish Department's news editor.



PLOTS Guides Available

Private Land Opens To Sportsmen Guides can be found at most vendors throughout the state in early September.

The PLOTS Guide will be similar to 2007 and feature more than 1 million PLOTS acres. However, because the guide is printed in August and distributed in early September, there will be some PLOTS in the guide that have been removed from the program as a result of producers terminating their CRP contracts with USDA. There will also be some PLOTS tracts where the habitat will have changed significantly because producers have terminated selected CRP contracts within the PLOTS agreement.

Hunters should realize they may arrive at a PLOTS they've hunted in previous years, and is still highlighted in the guide, to find the CRP habitat gone or severely manipulated. To minimize possible problems, the Department will update PLOTS map sheets as often as needed on its website at gf.nd.gov.

Hunters can also view the guide, and find a list of vendors where guides are available, on the Game and Fish Department's website.

The PLOTS Guide features maps highlighting these walk-in areas, identified in the field by inverted triangular yellow signs, as well as remaining public lands.

The guides are free, and available at county auditor offices and license vendors in the state; by walk-in at the Game and Fish Department's Bismarck office; and at district offices in Riverdale, Harvey (Lonetree), Williston, Dickinson, Jamestown and Devils Lake.

The guides are not available by mail, so hunters will have to print for viewing, or pick one up at a local vendor.